

What is hepatitis B?

An infection of the liver caused by hepatitis B viruses. Nine out of ten people who get hepatitis B clear their infection and recover. However, 10% of people who get hepatitis B remain infectious for life. This is called "chronic infection" and usually results in them becoming "carriers." **A carrier is a person who has chronic infection with hepatitis B viruses, and although he or she may not be sick, they are contagious and can infect others.** As many as 9 out of 10 infants who get hepatitis B from their mothers at birth become carriers. Of children who get hepatitis B between 1 and 5 years of age, 30% to 50% become carriers. By adulthood, the risk of becoming a carrier is 6% to 10%. People who are hepatitis B carriers are at risk of cirrhosis (a hardening of the liver), liver failure, and liver cancer.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Most people have no symptoms. *If* symptoms occur, they can be mild or severe and include nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, abdominal discomfort, fatigue, dark urine, and jaundice (yellow skin and eyes).

When do the first signs of illness occur?

If an infected person becomes ill, two weeks to six months (average is 8-12 weeks) after being infected.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is spread through sex and blood. You can get hepatitis B if you:

- share an infected person's needles and/or drug injection equipment.
- have unprotected sex with an infected person.
- come in contact with an infected person's open sore, blood or other body fluid.
- use an infected person's razor, toothbrush, or other items that could become contaminated with blood.
- were an infant born to an infected mother.

Hepatitis B is not spread by coughing or sneezing, a handshake or hug, sitting next to an infected person, or by sharing an infected person's food or drink.

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

- Hepatitis B vaccine, given in a series of three shots.
- Using a condom *consistently and correctly* during sexual intercourse.
- Exposures or possible exposures to hepatitis B should be evaluated immediately to determine appropriate preventive treatment. Consult a doctor or your health department.
- Preventive treatment at birth will protect almost all infants (95%) born to infected mothers.

If you have any questions, please call your doctor or local health department.

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